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ABSTRACT

For one professional teacher of writing, language is one of many locations in which political struggles exist, and the classroom is a site from which he and his students can actively examine culture, developing strategies of language use that can facilitate social change. Critical and feminist pedagogies are two closely related ways of teaching from which socially created power structures can be examined so that society can move towards new ways of thinking and towards a new consciousness. Davis, Resta, Miller, and Fortman (1999) encourage instructors in their informative years of teaching (i.e., beginning teachers) to conduct a type of action research in their own classrooms to discover ways to develop more effective classroom practices. This article is about such research. The article begins with how critical and feminist theories informed the author/educator's teaching of first-year composition at New Mexico State University, a land-grant institution. It then describes the specific classroom strategies that he adopted based on his reading of these two theories. Finally, it explores the student outcomes attributed to the implementation of these theories during the spring 1999 semester. (NKA)

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EDUCATION AS APPRENTICESHIP FOR SOCIAL ACTION: COMPOSITION INSTRUCTION, CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS, AND ENGAGED PEDAGOGY

by David Alan Sapp

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As a professional teacher of writing, I see language as one of many locations in which political struggles exist, and the classroom as a site from which my students and I can actively examine culture, developing strategies of language-use that can facilitate social change. Critical and feminist pedagogies are two closely-related ways of teaching from which we can examine socially-created power structures so that society can move towards new ways of thinking and towards a new consciousness. The state of critical consciousness that results from these pedagogies becomes realized when students, studying as apprentices for social action, begin to speak out for the interests of groups of which they are members. In the October 1999 issue of *Networks*, Davis, Resta, Miller, and Fortman encourage instructors in their informative years of teaching (i.e., beginning teachers) to conduct research in their own classrooms in order to discover ways to develop more effective classroom practices. They argue that by conducting this type of action research, instructors learn how to reflect on their own practices and, in turn, learn how to teach better. This article is about such research. I begin with how critical and feminist theories informed my teaching of first-year composition at New Mexico State University, a land-grant institution. I then describe the specific classroom strategies that I adopted based

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on my reading of these two theories. Finally, I explore the student outcomes attributed to the implementation of these theories during the spring 1999 semester.

Critical and Feminist Pedagogies

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire theorizes a critical pedagogy, based on his literacy work with Brazilian peasants, that opposes the dehumanizing, "banking method" of education. The banking method of education is based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represents gaining knowledge that can be deposited, stored, and used at a later date. Critical pedagogy serves instead to liberate students, demanding that they be active participants in the educational process, not merely passive consumers. In his critical pedagogy, Freire offers an alternative to the banking method of education; this alternative is a problem-posing style of education where teachers teach their students, as well as learn from and with them by engaging in dialogues of critical consciousness. Freire insists that these teachers trust their students and resist the temptation to tell them what their interests should be. Instead, his paradigm helps students practice a discursive literacy that offers them the ability to theorize as well as function in society. In turn, students have the ability to become more than mere "doers" in society; they actually become part of the decision-making process. That is, they become "thinkers" in the process, who are better able to "relate ideas, solve problems and manipulate a complex symbol system to communicate their thoughts in many voices" (Lindemann 1982: 8). According to Henry A. Giroux, "central to the notion of critical pedagogy is a politics of voice that combines a postmodern notion of difference with a feminist emphasis on the primacy of the political" (1997: 224).

Feminist educators position gender concerns as central to culture and power. However, as bell hooks points out, "often individuals who employ certain terms freely - terms like 'feminism' - are not necessarily practitioners whose habits of being and living most embody the action, the practice of theorizing or engaging in feminist struggle" (1994: 62). This can be particularly true for university teachers. Even many teachers who self-identify as feminists feel compelled to teach according to the traditional banking model for many reasons. However, since the classroom exists as one site of political struggle, critical and feminist paradigms can provide both teachers and students with a language through which they can analyze their own lives in a manner that is both affirmative and critical, offering them not only a language of critique but also "a language of possibility" (Giroux, 1997: 122).

Critical and feminist pedagogies are similar in that both provide professional teachers of writing, regardless of gender, opportunities to actively participate in the empowerment of students. Teaching critical thinking offers students the necessary intellectual skills to complicate the concept of "authority," and feminist pedagogy offers students a way to realign oppressive politics in society. Both of these paradigms place the classroom as the primary site for examining relationships of power in culture, rejecting the dichotomy of 'either/or' and replacing it with perspectives that allow students to problematize common sense

viewpoints, discover similarities within difference, and learn to watch themselves through multiple lenses. This process is crucial to society's development, especially considering that many of our students are convinced that they are already unified, coherent, sovereign selves who are able to make decisions simply by using common sense. As a critical and feminist teacher, I search for ways to help students explore influences on their lives, influences that shape their decision-making processes and, in some cases, limit their ability to become more than products of their culture. Inevitably, some students discover that decisions they have made have been set up for them and that they might not really have the choices that they think they have.

The practice of thinking critically is an important political act. If students can recognize that discourse often works by opposition in a system that defines, for example, women as inferior to men by placing women in positions of silence, then this opens up a possibility for social change. Students may come to see that our language only appears to be a shared body of signs, and that too often the language and logic of the dominant culture (i.e. white, male, middle-class, Christian, heterosexual, and so forth) are the only language and the only rewarded system of logic available to non-dominant people. Then, instead of accepting the situation as "natural," students can enter into a discussion that problematizes and critiques it, and perhaps creating new languages and logics of possibility. In other words, students can theorize and analyze how oppression works in various cultural sites and then can act politically. Critical and feminist educators, therefore, must be responsible for introducing pluralism into the classroom so students can study relationships of power, cultural literacy, and cultural capital. They must combine theory with practice for their teaching to become praxis-oriented, political, and performative. Critical and feminist pedagogy can then, to paraphrase bell hooks, make the classroom a place to transgress, to go beyond boundaries (1994: 12).

Learning to "Walk the Walk" in My Classroom

Professional teachers of writing are now being asked to do more: to teach practical skills (e.g., comma rules and memo formats) and, at the same time, to teach critical thinking, reading, and writing skills. In order to do all of this well, we need to develop teaching strategies that help to incorporate critical skills into our classes. By incorporating critical and feminist theory into a first-year composition course I taught during the spring 1999 semester, I attempted to do just that. I began this process by developing a non-directive teaching style - informed by critical and feminist scholarship - that included a planned negotiation with students at the beginning of the semester. This negotiation entailed allowing various course decisions to be agreed upon by consensus. For example, some texts were chosen by election, and grades were earned by completing the terms of a teacher/student-authored contract. In other words, I attempted to minimize the power of "the grade" by incorporating a dialogical grading system in which students and I negotiated criteria and consequences of evaluation.

In this course, I also encouraged students to collaborate on selected assignments and to attempt collective authoring of papers. I believe that by encouraging

students to collaborate on assignments, I provide them with opportunities to produce multi-voiced texts. Whether or not this goal was achieved, I would argue that as a result of these collaborations, many students realized that they not only could learn from me as the assigned teacher for the course but they could also learn from each other. This is related to another teaching strategy I borrowed and adapted from the critical and feminist literature, that is, I began the semester assuming that my working *with* students, not teaching *at* them, would result in student empowerment. For example, on several assignments, I worked as a collaborating ally with my students who, in return, served as apprentices in the classroom, sharing the responsibilities for teaching, evaluating, and leading class discussions. I hoped that my students would actively listen to and learn from each other's experiences, hearing other points of view, enabling them to accept new ideas and increase their understanding of others.

Other specific strategies I attempted concerned student-teacher communication behaviors in the classroom. For example, my students and I made it a habit not to interrupt each other during in-class discussions. This might seem obvious to many teachers, but, for me, this took considerable effort. Also by maintaining eye contact with my students during these discussions, I tried to show them that I was listening to them, and by paraphrasing, repeating, and often immediately writing down what they said, I let students know that what they said, and how they said it, was valued. Another strategy I used also concerned in-class discussions. When a student made a comment, asked a question, or answered one, I did not begin talking after the student's first sentence, as I had too often done in previous courses; instead, I waited a moment, making a deliberate pause. After a few seconds of silence, I then asked the student if she or he had anything to add. This was another way I attempted to actively show my valuing of student voices. I must admit that, at first, implementing these strategies seemed awkward and "unnatural," and many students commented on how they had never before experienced such a classroom discussion. However, after a few weeks of practice, we began to appreciate the benefits of such communication behaviors. I used phrases like "highly-directed, yet process-oriented" to describe our learning environment, while my students, in their formal course evaluations, characterized our time together as "stimulating yet laid back."

By the end of the semester, I observed several changes that I believe resulted from the teaching strategies I implemented in this course. Student outcomes that I attribute to these strategies include increased class and faculty office hour attendance, increased out-of-class communication between students and instructor (e.g., e-mail messages about course content), increased awareness of community issues (as evidenced in student writing), and an increased willingness to participate in class discussions. To illustrate these outcomes further, I briefly describe two students' experiences in the course in the following paragraphs.

"Lynn" is a self-identified "18-year-old feminist" who was determined to graduate from our university as an honor's student, attend medical school "at some far off place," and become a doctor "against all odds." Beginning in the first week of class, she told her classmates that she would achieve her goals by simply taking things in her own hands and not allowing anyone to stand in her

way. She believed that if she put her mind to it, she (and anyone else) could accomplish anything they wanted to. In getting to know her, the class learned about her two passions: self-help books and shooting her gun at the local firing range.

Lynn chose to examine issues of gender in the medical profession in her research project. In order to fulfill one of the requirements for the project, she was to interview several female doctors, asking them about obstacles they faced in their educational and professional lives. While Lynn used information from these interviews in supporting her argument, many of her peers thought "something" was missing in her essay. During an in-class peer critique session, one of her classmates (a 20-year-old who identified herself as "certainly not a feminist") asked Lynn why she didn't include a question to the doctors concerning the help they received from other people during the process of becoming doctors. Lynn thought about this question a moment and then admitted that such a question had not occurred to her. She agreed, however, to think about it more over the weekend and get back to us during our next class meeting. As it turns out, Lynn went home and used the weekend to call some of the doctors back and ask more questions. Lynn didn't have the time to significantly revise her research project to include information from the second round of interviews, but she clearly emerged from the process with a better understanding of the importance of social community. She learned from the second round of interviews that women, especially, need a lot of support and help to succeed in the medical profession due to the forces acting against them. Lynn realized that, in addition to hard work and extraordinary perseverance, female doctors had important mentors, family support, etc. In her end-of-the-semester reflection paper, Lynn indicated openness to accepting more support from family, friends, and academic peers in the pursuit of her goals, recognizing the relationship of community, networking, and the work done by women before her to her own success.

"Casey" is a Mormon student in his mid-twenties who had just returned from his two-year mission proselytizing "the truth." On the first day of class, Casey announced in his self-introduction speech that he is "politically and fiscally conservative and wants to become a senator." While some students initially labeled Casey as "one of those guys who likes to hear himself talk," they also discovered quickly that Casey has good writing skills. Many students actively sought his help during peer critique sessions. His writing style was well-suited to a product (rather than process) approach to writing, and it was obvious that he was accustomed to earning praise for this skill. Casey seemed to enjoy the attention and, perhaps as a result, adopted a role in the class that he felt required him to share his knowledge and experience with the class whenever he had the opportunity. This meant that he contributed to class discussions, answered questions posed by his classmates, and even asked questions during class discussions only to turn around and answer them himself without allowing others the opportunity to contribute. When asked about the frequency of these contributions, he explained that he felt there was no value in silence, and that if an answer existed to a question, one should simply say it loudly without reticence and move on to the next question.

One day, around the sixth week of the semester, Casey was answering a

question, and explaining to the class how he had come to his conclusion, when suddenly, one of the minority female students in the class confronted him. Although she was usually one of the more reserved students in the class, on this day she asserted, "Casey doesn't speak for me. He doesn't know what he's talking about." Casey stopped in mid-sentence and looked at me, expecting me to do something, but I remained silent. I felt my role in class didn't warrant interrupting this process. Casey remained quiet for the rest of the day's in-class discussion. Later that day, however, Casey came to my office hours to discuss the incident. I explained to him that different people often have different perspectives, different ways of seeing things, based on their life experiences. I tried to make connections to conversations we'd had in class about multiple "truths." I tried to explain how one person's truth may not serve another person's best interests, or even make sense to another person, based on her or his life experience, that benefits from some solutions just don't "trickle down like that." Casey was able to hear this notion for the first time, granted in a private conversation with a so-called authority figure who is, like him, white and male. Nevertheless, his behavior began to change. By the end of the semester, Casey began to find some value in listening to others, an appreciation for hearing the other side of an issue, and he promised his classmates that he was now dedicated to "developing and perfecting" his listening skills. Casey still admitted his discomfort in silence, but agreed that there was value in hearing from a variety of people during class discussions and even noted that this new skill would be useful to him when he became a senator, helping him to relate better to his constituency.

I still receive periodic updates from Lynn and Casey, e-mail messages telling me about decisions they've made in their lives. They ask me to recommend courses for them. Lynn has asked me to write her a letter of recommendation for medical school. Casey even invited me to his wedding. Neither of them has changed their career plans, but they both openly admit to me that they now look at their lives with "eyes wide open" as a result of the time we shared together.

Conclusion

Ira Shor contends that "the role of [the critical] teacher as initiator remains indispensable, because students have not yet been able to start [the process of developing critical consciousness] by themselves" (1980: 84). I certainly realize that there is no guarantee that my efforts will lead to students' voicing resistance to oppressive structures; I don't want to teach my students to merely echo my political beliefs and opinions. But I would maintain that one of my goals as a critical and feminist educator, beyond facilitating social change, is simply (or not so simply) to help my students make connections. And if this process leads them to attempt to cross boundaries and/or challenge existing hierarchies, then so be it.

I realize that learning to teach is an on-going process, and I become as frustrated as anyone when some of my students never seem to get beyond the "just tell me what I need to know" stage during the semester we spend together. In this, I am sure that I am not alone. But despite these frustrations, I continue to explore new possibilities in teaching and classroom-based action research. For instance, I

know I need to do more systematic analysis of the students' responses to, and learning outcomes from, these alternative pedagogical strategies. Particularly, it would be useful to compare the responses of traditional students and minority students, and to document the variety of voices and experiences in response to becoming a co-participant in the teaching/learning process. This is what the Freirian notion of *praxis* is all about: engaging in an ongoing spiral of knowledge acquisition, action, and reflection in order to continue a struggle for a more just educational system and a more just society overall.

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